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A CONTEMPORARY
CHINESE ARTIST

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Although there is some parity between the surface area of China and that of our own continent, the billion plus population spread across China leaves an impression of vastness; vastness in human terms. Very little of that gargantuan country is not utilised, is not tended for the purposes of sustaining the population. That degree of caring often produces vistas of great elegance: a landscape designed and shaped by functional concerns and worked and re-worked down the millennia, a handmade landscape.

In 1988 (my last visit), Beijing, stripped of its historic city wall, was in the midst of a high-rise building boom. An old city trudging into modernity with sewerage schemes, the motor car contesting the streets with a few million push-bikes, urban resettlement and rising levels of pollution. The Avenue of Heavenly Peace, a great, broad concourse, had the makings of a man versus machine battlefield, even before the tanks of June 1989.▷

INTRODUCTION

BY GEOFF PARR

With *American Express* sponsoring the bilingual signage in the Forbidden City, with *Coca Cola* across-the-counter and *Polaroid* instant-photo stalls, the devils from the depths of the sea were already well established, and windows showing glimpses of the West were open each day via millions of television sets. Tradition was losing the contest. The wooden water pail had been replaced by the brightly coloured, plastic bucket.

■ In visual art, practice beneath the shadow of so great an art heritage - past-prescriptions delivering up the forms of the present - had become an anachronism; especially so for artists who, out of the corners of their eyes, could see a looming modernity. Television sets, washing machines and refrigerators (our generic term for them is 'white goods') were replacing the shaped and manicured tree, the volcanic monolith, goldfish and the bamboo sprig as objects of contemplation and even possession. Painting had shifted from an exposé of nature's truths to an illustration of style and tradition.

■ Enter the individual, the one amongst millions. This heroic concept of a unique vision, of a stand-alone artist-creator, a figure deified during the modern age and partially discredited in the post modern.▷

And yet in the West, individuality remains a strong perception of self and carries with it a burden of responsibility. There are instances of visitors to China becoming enamoured with the notion of communalism and the prospect of shedding that burden of individual responsibility and losing some of the freedom for independent action. But I don't know what the Chinese themselves think. Is there a reverse side? Was it the spectre of freedom for independent action which danced so beguilingly at Tiananmen Square two years ago? Is it perhaps that Western ideology sneaks in through Chinese television sets in the form of second-hand, Chinese dubbed, 1950's American soapies? Is materialism, as it is known in advanced industrialised countries, a reasonable and sustainable expectation in China, or for that matter, in a world becoming more heavily populated each minute of each day?

These are questions posed by a long nose: someone perceiving the world from the viewpoint of Western norms and here is the difficulty - will someone of that ilk recognise a Chinese avant-garde art if he stumbles upon it?

Deep within those dense regions, be it in Shanghai, Hangzhou or Beijing, what are the chances for the conception of an ▷

avant-garde? How would such a vision be fostered? How would the drive and optimism be maintained and how will the artist reach out from a suburban address in Beijing and locate his or her work in the flow of twentieth century modern art? Tantalising!

This exhibition presents to you Guan Wei, Beijing based, contemporary artist. The reality of that announcement is, in itself, just so amazing:

A man in a billion.

Right up to his fourth glass of claret, Guan Wei is a quiet and gentle person who would rather smile than frown and who laughs inside and through his paintings. To the viewer, these paintings provoke the laughter which culminates in a "Yes"; the acknowledgement of a deeper insight.

His paintings are not quite like anything we have seen before, East or West. They come from a predominantly monochrome world and point to little items in the human condition, but, just as little things can be the harbinger of momentous matters, so the "ping" produced by the mischievous pointing forefinger of Guan Wei, may be announcing the coming of a resounding "pung", with reverberations that shake convention in true avant-garde fashion. □



HUNG BALL

Acrylic on canvas 1990

10 x 34 inches

around with "concepts". All is suffering; all is empty. In a way this is not that different from the monks of yore, though you don't see anyone today coming up with pastoral poems or landscape paintings as in the past.

Idleness, "nesting", is a kind of attitude, a lifestyle. When you get tired of it then you just have to try even harder to hang out. When you look up it's easy to get a stiff neck, when you stare straight ahead it's easy to flake out, and when you look down it's easy to get dizzy. Aches, flakes, and faints plus jerry built "new concepts" are what contemporary Chinese art contributes to the world. The proof is in my poetry:

Aches -- enervation to the nth

The desire to ascend. The desire to descend,
The desire to exit, and the desire to enter
Thinking ahead, looking back
checking things out left and right,
looking up at the sky,
looking down at the ground,
gazing outwards, exploring inwards
Can the bones and tendons really take it-
who cares!

Flakes -- thick as a brick

Look, stare, but still things aren't clear
Play. Playing without getting here or there ▷

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Taste. Tasting but you don't know what it is
Just pick your nose, all is the void.

Faunts - - dull as they come

No idea that birds fly in the sky

Not a clue that men run crazily
over the earth

Why *does* the sun rise in the East?

Why does anyone need to attain *Tao*?

New concepts...

Tradition plus a little physics

The Buddha is just a universal machine

Man is no more than DNA

Transversing the world in his dreams.

It is not easy to come to grips with these
four basic elements, and there are new
things being added all the time. I can even
feel one coming over me at this instant-
boredom.

But in the end it all comes back to the ways
of *wo*. That's what turtles do: just pull in
their heads and *wo* out. Slow, plodding and
oh-so-patient. Hard on the outside, but soft
as all get-out deep down. They can't protect
themselves but they can still handle
everything. They can even take on a hare in
a race when the time comes. They're cool,
take it all in their stride, and they live▷

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oh-so-long. No wonder the ancients called
them "dragons with humps". Let me say it
in verse:

The Big Way. The Little Way.

The Usual Way.

A thousand attitudes, a hundred poses,
the mainstream state.

Change as you will, you still can't suss it.

Only the tortoise can wo its way through.

**This is the spirit, the philosophy, the
phenomenon, the ism, the be-all and end-
all of "nesting".**

Just think of turtles and happy "nesting".

Guan Wei, 24 February, 1991

(wo-fully translated

by Linda Jaivin and Geremie Barme)

*The Chinese title of this essay is "Wo" de
yishu literally "the art of wo". Wo has a
range of meanings from nest, as in bird's
nest, to idleness and incompetence.*

**Please allow me to express my appreciation
to Professor Geoff Parr of the University of
Tasmania and to the Visual Arts and Crafts
Board of the Australia Council: this exhibition
has only been possible through their support.**

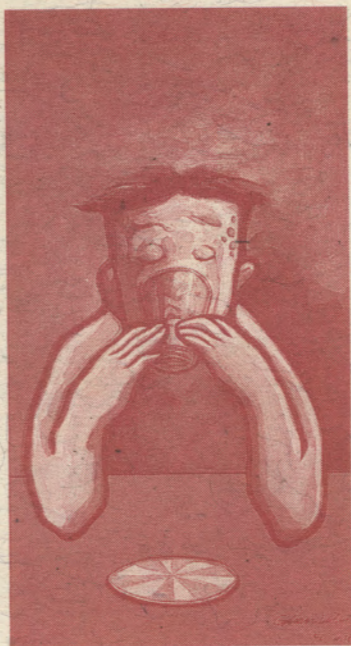
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PERSON ROLLING A BALL

Acrylic on canvas 1990

18 x 34 inches



Guan Wei was born in Beijing in 1957. He graduated from the Department of Fine Arts of Beijing Teachers College and is now an art teacher in a middle school.

He began his art career in 1978 and since then has painted several series of works including Small Yards, Self-portraits, Figures with Acupoints, Bean-Like Eyes and Red Soles, Dhyana of Two Fingers, Diary, Paper, and representative works: Zhi Hu Zhe Yie, Pay Attention to Hygiene, Stamp A Circle and Play Rope.

Since 1989 Guan Wei has been at the University of Tasmania as a visiting artist.

B I O G R A P H Y

1986 Four Artists Art Works,

Peking University

1986 Autumn Salon Exhibition, Paris

1987 Guan Wei and Ah Xian Paintings,

Peking University

1988 Alumnus Paintings, Beijing

Teachers College, Beijing

1989 Individual Paintings,

French Embassy, Beijing

1990 Contemporary Chinese Young

Artists' Works, Twin Cranes

Gallery, Seattle, USA

1990 International Youth Art Show,

Paris

1990 Lun Exhibition, 6 artists, Beijing

1991 Guan Wei, Artist from the

Republic of China.

Photospace Gallery

School of Art Canberra

Guan Wei's works are published in
magazines and are represented in numerous
private collections internationally.

EXHIBITION
H I S T O R Y

1	Play Card	18 x 34
2	Sing	24 x 50
3	Hot	18 x 34
4	Radish	18 x 34
5	Facial Makeup	18 x 34
6	Beef soup	18 x 34
7	Sliding ball	18 x 34
8	Dominoes	18 x 34
9	Hide-and-seek	24 x 50
10	Self-portrait	18 x 34
11	Spray	18 x 34
12	Straw	18 x 34
13	The five element chart	24 x 50
14	Go back	24 x 50
15	Footprints	24 x 50
16	Sun-Moon-Star	24 x 50
17	Gum	18 x 34
18	Four seasons	24 x 34
19	Practise Taoism	24 x 50
20	Xuan Bird	24 x 50
21	Past-Present-Future	24 x 50
22	Running wind	24 x 50
23	Handstand	24 x 50

LIST OF WORKS

(All acrylic, measurements in inches)

24	Clasp and pillar	24 x 50
25	The beginning of autumn	24 x 50
26	Run madly	24 x 50
27	Day and night	24 x 50
28	Time and space	24 x 50
29	Get out	24 x 50
30	What is this?	24 x 50
31	Freedom in oneself	24 x 50
32	Yes or no · False or true · Ying or Yang	24 x 50
33	Zhao, Tian, Zhang, Li and Wang	24 x 50
34	Ring	18 x 34
35	Nipple	18 x 34
36	Two yellow balls	18 x 34
37	Red fingerprints	18 x 34
38	Hung ball	18 x 34
39	Dancing	24 x 50
40	Call	24 x 50
41	Play Chess	18 x 34
42	Droop	24 x 50
43	Yellow disk	18 x 34
44	Round fan	18 x 34
45	A reel of thread	18 x 34
46	Held ball	18 x 34
47	Yes	18 x 34
48	Not	18 x 34
49	The	18 x 34
50	For	18 x 34
51	Oh	18 x 34
52	Gosh	18 x 34
53	Aha	18 x 34
54	Why?	18 x 34

Guan Wei's artist-in-residency at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, was made possible through generous assistance from the Australia Council, the Federal Government's Arts funding body.

The residency was arranged through Dr Nicholas Jose, who was at the time Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy, Beijing.

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Statement by the artist (assistance with translation, Linda Jaivin and Geremie Barne).

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The Artist, the Writers and the University of
Tasmania

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